

by Alexander Gardner



Mt. Koya, on the southern part of Japan's main island of Honshu, was the seat of Kobo Daishi, otherwise known as Kukai, the founder of Japan's Shingon sect of esoteric Buddhism. Since the ninth century, the mountain has been a major pilgrimage destination for Japanese followers of Kukai, who is said to still be present on the mountain. Koyasan is also a primary place to worship the Great Sun Buddha, Vairocana, the central deity of Shingon. In *Sacred Koyasan* (SUNY Press, 2007), Philip Nicoloff presents a portrait of the mountain that ably transports the reader to the heart of the Shingon world. The book, primarily an ethnography of Mt. Koya's Buddhist community, is a capable piece of scholarship, referencing academic studies of Koyasan, Kukai, and Shingon. Yet the descriptions of the landscape and ritual activity, and even the lengthy section on the history of the place, are so beautifully written that it reads more like a fine piece of travel writing. This is Buddhism as a living—and lived—phenomenon, and a welcome reminder that Buddhism remains a vibrant presence in Japanese society.

Jeffrey Hopkins is well known for his translations of Tibetan and Indian classics and his erudite studies of doctrine. But in recent years, he has also been making efforts to reach a wider audience. In *A Truthful Heart: Buddhist Practices for Connecting with Others* (Snow Lion, 2008), Hopkins draws on his extensive knowledge and personal experience to present an especially lovely book on the need for compassion and the way to cultivate it. In seventeen tightly composed chapters, highlighting six virtues (equanimity, recognizing friends, reflecting on others' kindness, returning kindness, love, and compassion), Hopkins provides simple exercises for putting compassion into practice, something he emphasizes anyone can do. He underscores this point in his introduction, where he recalls his own youth as a loner and malcontent who earned himself the nickname "Mr. Puke." If he was able to successfully cultivate compassion and reach across the self/other chasm, Hopkins contends, anyone can.

Patrick Olivelle's *Life of the Buddha* (Clay Sanskrit Library/ NYU Press, 2008) is a new translation of Asvaghosa's *Buddhacarita*, a great poetic narrative of the Buddha's life. Asvaghosa, who lived in the first or second century, was a convert to Buddhism, and, as Olivelle explains in his introduction, he brought his Brahmanism (the ever-evolving traditions of the Vedas) with him. Olivelle reads the text as a response to Brahmani-

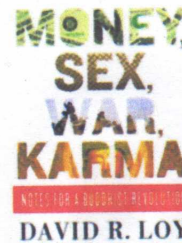
cal criticism, one that positions Buddhism as the fulfillment of Brahmanism rather than its opponent. Because the second half of the text no longer survives in Sanskrit, preserved only in Chinese and Tibetan translation, Olivelle provides only a summary of Asvaghosa's treatment of the period of the Buddha's life following his enlightenment. Overall, the translation is nicely annotated with endnotes explaining the poet's allusions and unfamiliar terms and names, and there's also a helpful glossary of names.

In 1953, the journal *Philosophy East and West* published a debate between the popular Zen preacher D. T. Suzuki and the eminent Chinese historian Hu Shi. At stake was the "real Zen"—that is, whether it was a cultural phenomenon with a history or instead an ineffable mystery and an unmediated personal experience. As Steven Heine makes clear in his *Zen Skin, Zen Marrow* (Oxford University Press,



2008), this debate—he fancies it a "war"—is pervasive and ongoing, and of concern both to the scholar and the practitioner. I'm not convinced that all that many people are concerned with this issue, but the debate is a fascinating example of religious discourse in this country. Specifically, it illustrates the refusal—some would say inability—of religious scholars and practitioners to take one another seriously. In addition to laying out the dispute at hand, Heine points to a constructive compromise. It remains to be seen whether the opposing camps will see it that way.

David Loy's *Money, Sex, War, Karma: Notes for a Buddhist Revolution* (Wisdom Publications, 2008) might have a flashy title, but it is a serious and substantial book that poses real challenges to the committed reader. The book builds on a theme that Loy has been working on for several of his last books—namely, that the three poisons are so intricately built into our



society (greed in the market economy, anger in the military industrial complex, and delusion in the fame-chasing omnipresent commercial media) that awakening needs to happen in the social as well as the personal realm. This places the book firmly in the realm of Engaged Buddhism. However, its overarching theme concerns how to ensure that

